



**State of Wisconsin**  
**Department of Public Instruction**  
Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

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\*\*\*AMERICAN EDUCATION WEEK GUEST EDITORIAL\*\*\*

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CONTACT: Joseph Donovan, Communications Officer, (608) 266-3559

## American Education Week: Celebrating the progress of public education

*By State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster*

Each year during the November American Education Week observance (Nov. 13-19), we have the opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments of our public schools and to acknowledge the importance of community support for public education.

Although an educated citizenry was considered important in the founding of our nation, the concept of the common, or public, school didn't come about until the mid-1800s, largely through the efforts of Horace Mann. As a state senator, he worked to establish the Massachusetts board of education and became that state's first secretary of education in 1837. He studied and wrote persuasively of the importance of education in the improvement of society and saw the common schools—which educated all children, rich or poor—as a way to equalize educational opportunity. He argued that education was a natural right of every child and that it was the responsibility of the state to ensure that every child received an education.

Prior to Mann's efforts, educating all children was not considered very important and wasn't very extensive. Schooling, when offered, lasted about three months of the year and was provided by untrained teachers, who had inadequate facilities and supplies. Family wealth, race, and gender had the strongest impact on how much formal education a child received.

Today, our public schools welcome every child that comes to their doors regardless of family income, the educational background of the parents, or the language spoken at home. Children are entitled to a free appropriate public education from kindergarten through graduation from high school and receive instruction in a full range of subject areas.

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From competing demands, to instructional and operational issues, to fiscal constraints, our public schools face many challenges. To meet these challenges, our public schools, now more than ever, need our support. Around our state, it is our public schools that contribute to a community's unique identity and provide a foundation to keep it strong. Our schools can help foster the civic virtue that supports the common good by reaching out to their local communities. All across the state, schools forge partnerships with civic organizations, businesses, and industry and pursue civic engagement activities like service-learning to reinforce school and community connections.

Horace Mann recognized the integral relationship between education, freedom, and our republican form of government. His thoughts are captured in this year's American Education Week theme, "A Strong America Starts with Great Public Schools." Truly, every community depends on strong public schools and public schools depend on strong communities. During American Education Week, I encourage all Wisconsin citizens to give thought to the importance of public education in sustaining our democracy and our way of life. The investment we make in today's children will pay dividends for their future and ours.

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*Elizabeth Burmaster is the elected state superintendent of public instruction.*

**NOTE:** To download a high resolution photo of the state superintendent, visit the Department of Public Instruction "Media Contacts and Resources" webpage at < <http://dpi.wisconsin.gov/eis/vm-media.html> >.